Congressional Testimony

AFGHAN ELECTIONS: WHAT HAPPENED AND WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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WHY STATE-BUILDING IS FAILING IN AFGHANISTAN

Chosen by the United States in 2001 largely because of his proximity to the Bush administration, President Hamid Karzai lacked a political base in Afghanistan and relied more and more on a narrow coterie to fill the important positions of his administration. Karzai tried to eliminate local powers who had the potential to threaten his control of the periphery, mostly by nominating his political allies as regional governors. Due to poor choices, based more on personal relations than competence, this strategy backfired and only produced more political fragmentation. It is important to understand how that fragmentation occurred.

One of the keys to the success of the insurgency is the complete lack of functioning government institutions at the district level (*uluswali*). Some district administrators are corrupt, while others just aren't that good at their jobs, but even the incompetents often go on to be posted in other districts due to their personal connections in the government.

The main problem is the absence of security and state structures, notably police and judges. Relatively little foreign money has been directed toward institution-building, and in the case of the police and the judiciary, programs have been a total failure. In most cases, people defer their cases to local *jirga* (tribal councils, where they are effective and their judgments are respected) or to *shariat* justice given by local *ulema* (Islamic legal scholars). In practice, there are no judges in Afghanistan, and the police force is very weak. The police are not paid enough, and have a reputation for corruption. Most provinces employ no more than 1,000 policemen – and often this many only in theory – even Kunduz, where the population is close to one million.

Finally, the Afghan National Army (ANA) is unable to operate autonomously in large units due to a lack of sufficient command and control. The ANA's training is better than that of the police forces, and some anecdotal evidence indicates that it has a better fighting spirit, but it still cannot operate on its own. Observers in direct contact with the ANA are not confident that it can conduct operations with more than 100 troops. In the North, the International Coalition (IC) has thousands of troops, but they are not engaged in the fight against the insurgency. For example, when insurgents attacked the northern gate of the city of Kunduz in mid-April, the local German forces (who were only a few kilometers away) did not intervene.

Into this administrative and security void, the Taliban are pouring an alternative administration, discrediting the central government, and extending their influence in places where they have no initial support among the population. A significant number of districts in the South and East are outside the reach of Afghan officials. The government could send troops, but it cannot administer the population in any meaningful sense, and most of the military presence is that of the IC.

Amid this lack of security, local leaders are (re)arming quickly. The main effect of the disarmament program in 2003-4 – which paid local militias to surrender their weapons – was to allow militias to buy new, more expensive ones. After 2006, the dominant perception among Afghans has been that the state is not going to stop the insurgency. As a result, local

groups began buying up arms. What regulations exist are not enforced and, even in Kabul, it is extremely easy to buy weapons in significant numbers.

REDEFINE INSTITUTION-BUILDING

The Afghan state was built with external help: British support, development aid from the 1950s to the 1970s, Soviet support to the communist regime, and, today, assistance from Western countries. Afghanistan is thus a shining example of what international relations theorists refer to as a "rentier state," with foreign help playing the role that natural resources might in other countries. The country's need for allied financial and technical support will probably be open-ended, but it is reasonable for the International Coalition to set a goal of leaving an Afghan government that can survive on its own after Western armies withdraw. This is why the IC should concentrate power in limited areas and in a few critical institutions.

One of the major problems we now face is that the institutions built in the last seven years are ineffective in delivering services to the Afghan people, but sometimes strong enough to oppose foreign interference. (Case in point: the Afghan Supreme Court's refusal to reform its practices.) Since security should be NATO's primary objective and the only basis on which it can withdraw, the ANA, the police, and the judicial system must be the priorities for institution-building. The IC should further concentrate its resources by geographically limiting its efforts to strategic areas.

ABANDON FAILED POLICIES, FOCUS ON REALISTIC GOALS

Given the International Coalition's limited resources, there are several otherwise important aims that should not be priorities, given their costs and their consequences as distractions from the central objectives.

We do not have the resources to fight drug production. The social and political costs are simply too high. Opium crop eradication in Afghanistan has never worked, except when the Taliban undertook it, and even then, while production was stopped in 2000, trafficking continued, and the Taliban derived important revenues from it. The Taliban were relatively successful in fighting drug production for a time, because they had reasonable control over the rural areas and were sufficiently organized to carry out their policy, but it ended up proving very costly for them. Tribes with economic interests in drugs jumped at the opportunity to betray the Taliban and join U.S. forces in 2001, and they planted poppies even before the fighting had ended. Local programs can only change the organization of the production, not eradicate it.

Second, the drug economy is probably the single most important source of personal income in Afghanistan today (in cash, at least). Farmers depend on the revenues. The Taliban benefit as well, but so do Afghan government officials at the highest levels. Other than fighting on a small scale against trafficking and laboratories, it would be immensely difficult and politically costly to put a serious dent in drug production in Afghanistan. Eradication undermines the

International Coalition's main objective, diverts critical resources, could weaken or alienate Kabul's local allies, and is not an effective strategy against the Taliban.

Development is not the key in Afghanistan. The Afghans do not choose their political allegiances based on the level of aid. Economic aid plays a marginal role in the war, and is not a practical way to gain control of a territory. Rather, whoever controls the territory is the most important factor in Afghans' political allegiances. In other words, development must come after military control in the strategic areas, as a consolidating process. Aid is also not instrumental in addressing the central issues of an exit strategy. Development should be territorially concentrated in the strategic areas, where it can reinforce the institutions.

If this analysis is correct, the Coalition should reconsider the role of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). What is their supposed strategic impact? I would argue that the PRTs are ineffective in state-building and also of limited utility in preparing for withdrawal; hence, they should not be a priority. The PRT concept is technically useful in some cases, but it is a long-term liability for Western forces, because it takes the place of the Afghan state, marginalizing Afghan players. If Western troops are in charge, there is no reason not to give civil operations to real NGOs or Afghan institutions. Moreover, the PRTs are unable to change the perceptions of the Afghan population significantly. Local populations are essentially dependent on whoever controls the territories in which they live. Nor do the PRTs make up for civilian casualties caused by allied bombings, the humiliation of door-to-door searches – which are exceptionally odious to the Pashtuns – and other actions.

HOW CENTRALIZED SHOULD THE AFGHAN STATE BE?

It has been argued that the multi-ethnic composition of Afghan society calls for more decentralized institutions, perhaps a federal system. Some political forces, notably the Hezb-i Wahdat and the Jumbesh – both ethnically-based – have been arguing for a weak central government and some reorganization of the existing provincial framework since the 1990s.

This strategy is potentially dangerous. The multi-ethnic nature of Afghan society does not mean that ethnic groups are settled in distinct territories. On the contrary, northern Afghanistan is a complex mix of ethnic groups. To redefine the boundaries of Afghan provinces would provoke a widespread feeling of insecurity among groups that are local minorities. Pashtun groups in the North and the West would be at risk, and for the first time in Afghanistan's modern history, ethnic cleansing would be a likely outcome. When the Taliban went North in the 1990s, it caused serious tensions. Federalism would also make regional powers – for example, in the Hazarajat at the center of the country – even more autonomous from Kabul.

On a strategic level, this trend would run contrary to the state-building strategy that is central to the withdrawal of Western troops. The Coalition must do everything in its power to avoid the perception that it is ethnicizing the war. I argue instead for a limited and strongly centralized state. Limited, at least in the short term, in the sense that it would not have enough resources to implement complex policies or carry out functions throughout the

country. Centralized, in the sense that the center (Kabul) must be in control of some specific policies and build support in the strategic areas.

Another key question that has been insufficiently addressed is the lack of political institutions that can represent the different interests in Afghan society. The electoral system used in the 2004 and 2005 elections was so badly designed that it not only failed to encourage the formation of political parties, it actually discouraged their formation. As a result, the parliament never created a national political elite, and political leaders never emerged. The government must take its diminished standing in the wake of its dubious victory in the August 2009 elections as an opportunity to change the electoral system. If Afghan officials wish to build a strong and enduring state, they must make political parties the central elements of political representation, instead of focusing on the individual personalities of the candidates.

THE AFGHAN SECURITY APPARATUS

The focus on external military resources is misleading, in the sense that the real test of a counterinsurgency strategy is the ability to build an indigenous force that eventually operates alone. The pertinent question is not the U.S. Army's adaptation or lack thereof to counterinsurgency, but the use of its resources to build an Afghan partner. Observers have focused excessively on the number of International Coalition troops, rather than on how they are used, and paid too little attention to the Afghan National Army. It would be more efficient to cap the overall costs of the war and progressively redirect resources to an Afghan partner. More money would certainly help, as well, at least to ensure that Afghan soldiers are not paid less than the Taliban, as they now are.

The Coalition must redirect resources toward the Afghan security apparatus, because both the police and the army are deeply dysfunctional institutions. The ANA is weak, and simply increasing its numbers will not address the central questions of its efficiency and its resolve. After seven years, the ANA is still unable to fight the Taliban alone, and its desertion rate is still extremely high. More to the point, the ANA will progress only when it has more responsibilities in the field. In addition, the failure of the German forces charged with establishing a police force has had far-reaching consequences: In the cities, where rebuilding institutions is most critical, the police sometimes threaten citizens' basic security more than the Taliban does. The formation of the Afghan police force is now in the hands of the European Union and the United States, but it will take years to see results on this front.

The ANA should not be sent to fight in the far Pashtun countryside, as it lacks the necessary degree of professionalism and coordination to take on tough offensive operations. The army should instead be designed initially as a defensive force, able to secure strategic areas. ANA operations should be limited to the strategic zones and, to a certain extent, to the buffer zones around them. Air power can be used to maintain the general balance of power, and notably to prevent concentrations of Taliban forces from massing to attack strategic or buffer areas.

An important dimension of this strategy is to build an army that is under the control of the national government. In this sense, the integration of militia forces into the Afghan army has

been a failure and needs to be rethought. In the North, militias are theoretically part of the Afghan army, but remain under the de facto control of local leaders like Rashid Dostum. In the long term, the central government must address this challenge directly, and take control of at least the military infrastructure in the North. Cities, too, are key to state-building and must be put under central control, including areas where there is no immediate Taliban threat. In this respect, the major failure at present is the government's inability to take control of the security apparatus in places like Kunduz, Mazar-i Sharif, and Maimana. If the state is going to survive in Afghanistan, it must secure a solid base in the North.

DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

Contrary to popular belief, the war in Afghanistan suffers not from a lack of resources, but from a strikingly bad allocation of them. First, aid flows mostly to areas where the government presence is generally nonexistent and integrity is largely recognized to be lacking. Second, troops are not efficiently distributed: 20,000 troops are mobilized in Helmand province to no effect, when they are needed elsewhere – in Kunduz, for example – to fight or to protect cities. The troops currently deployed in the North are neither trained nor motivated to fight a counterinsurgency war, a priority now, since some NATO governments are implicitly demanding zero-casualty tactics.

Before the Coalition allocates any more resources for reconstruction and development, it must fix the current system, which is plagued by a serious lack of accountability and an incorrect geographical focus. In addition to the military costs, the Coalition has contributed billions for development in Afghanistan. According to the Afghan Ministry of Finance, over 60 multilateral donors have spent about $36 billion on reconstruction and humanitarian projects in the country since 2002, and it would be all but impossible to determine where most of that money went.

Similarly, since 2001, Coalition countries have spent some $25 billion on security-related assistance to Afghanistan, such as building up the Afghan security forces. These countries have promised the same amount of aid for reconstruction and development, but some leading donors have delivered little more than half of their aid commitments. So far, the Coalition has only spent $15 billion in aid, of which it is estimated that a staggering 40 percent has returned to donor countries in the form of consultant salaries and corporate profits.

Clearly, there are limitations on the amount of money that can be spent in Afghanistan, especially while the territory under government control is rapidly shrinking. Second, any investment made in the countryside, where the Taliban are in control, will simply help fund the insurgency. Third, the relationship between development and violence is not simple. As in other cases, such as the Kurdish insurgency, improved economic conditions and greater development do not necessarily portend an improved political situation. Finally, a civilian surge would not address the heart of the problem: huge corruption and inefficiency in Kabul, facilitated by a war economy.

Nor does the current allocation of resources help. If it were a state, Helmand alone would be the world's fifth-largest recipient of funds from the U.S. Agency for International

Development. These disparities are also reflected in the pattern of combined government and donor spending: for 2007-2008, the most insecure provinces – Nimroz, Helmand, Zabul, Kandahar and Uruzgan – have been allocated more than $200 per person, while many other provinces are due to receive less than half that amount and some, such as Sari Pul and Takhar, are allocated less than one-third.

This irrational distribution of resources is due partially to the fact that aid often comes from the 26 NATO-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Each PRT is headed by the largest troop-contributing nation in a given province, according to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Thus the U.S. and UK PRTs are investing heavily in the most contested areas, with few significant results. The aid becomes part of the war economy, especially in the rural areas of the South, where insurgents take a cut of almost every project implemented.

The Coalition must stop rewarding the most dangerous areas and focus on those where success is actually attainable. In addition, whatever the official line, the current policy is resulting in the transfer of increasing levels of responsibility from the Afghans to the Coalition, causing Afghan officials to appear powerless vis-à-vis the local PRTs, especially in places where the Taliban dominate. Increasing levels of aid can thus backfire and accelerate the ongoing disintegration of local institutions.

The Coalition must shift the focus of its investment from war-torn areas to more peaceful localities where there is greater accountability. Aid must go where there is control on the ground: To cities, towns, and districts with local support for the Coalition.

And the Coalition must see to it that the Afghan state takes more, not less, responsibility for providing security and services within its territory. Those are the makings of victory in Afghanistan, and the beginning of an exit strategy.